

CONTEMPO



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THIS AMERICAN TEMPO

CREATIONS BY JOHN VASSOS

TEXT BY RUTH VASSOS

NEW YORK

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TYPOGRAPHY BY ROBERT S. JOSEPHY

To AMERICA

FOREWORD

It was prophesied by the sages and long bearded savants of Europe that the world war had sounded the knell for western civilization—that creative energy and genius were doomed. On the contrary; like a Phoenix rising from the ashes of a burned-out world, a new and vigorous expression has sprung up with tremendous intensity.

I came to this country directly the war was over and after a period I began to feel a certain spirit that is here. The underlying and dormant forces were struggling to free themselves from the Victorian lethargy of the pre-war period. The torch lit by American inventive genius and taken up in Europe by such rebellious spirits as Cezanne and Van Gogh is now the burning force that actuates the painting of such men as Marin, the music of Gershwin, the writing of Robinson Jeffers and Sherwood Anderson and the intensity of our architecture.

We are a country of extremes. Our expressions range from the sublime to the ridiculous. We are capable of buffoonery, which is healthy—our anthropologists and scientists enjoy Coney Island and hot-dogs. We are capable of appreciation of beauty in the abstract—our tall

buildings would never have gone up had not a subconscious desire for them existed. And the skyscrapers, to my mind, are probably the most perfect example of abstract beauty the world has had in generations.

I have tried to make this book a purely illustrative and unbiased expression of certain phases and influences here that help make what I like to call This American Tempo. A certain sharp staccato rhythm almost like a rivetting machine, that exists nowhere else in the world. I do not hesitate to say that I have been affected by it. If I have also shown a touch of Paganism, you must forgive me and remember that my ancestors after all were Hellenic. This restless vitality that is so evident here to-day is not to be resisted, because in it is the well-spring of creation.

In concluding, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Mr. John Macrae, my publisher, for his patience with my ideas, for his enthusiasm and understanding, without which this book would not have been possible; and to Ruth Vassos, who has put in words all that I could not put in the pictures.

J. V.

ELECTRICITY

ELECTRICITY

One of the greater gods, all powerful and omnipresent, of tremendous élan. He touches simultaneously the north pole and the south. His strength is unmeasured, his power untold, his speed unmatched. His origin is mystery. Freely he offers us his services and we try to chain him.

How gloriously he lights the sky, the air is rent and the heavens shake at his power; fire bursts from his hand and mortals tremble.

Inventors scheme to devise new ways to use him. The telephone, the telegraph, the radio; dynamos run and cities are lighted; he is warp and woof of our daily lives. And in return, we put him to the crowning ignominy—the electric chair.



ADVERTISING

ADVERTISING

Pages and pages of pictures, lines and lines of type. Shout the loudest, cry your wares the hardest, spend a million dollars, create a market, manufacture a demand. Let the experts peddle your products for you. Feed the eye, stimulate the imagination, tickle the appetite of the mob with pictures of pretty girls, with pictures of legs. Don't ruin your hands with soap, use Ivory; four out of every five have it, why not you?, reach for a Lucky, create a slogan. Weeklies, monthlies, dailies; newspapers, news reels; from the pulpit, from the press, from the editorial pages, from the radio; don't leave a surface untouched; use the elevated, use the subway, use the surface car, use the buses; put up billboards; every tree is grown for a sign, every building built for a slogan; all the sky for writing, every man for a sandwich board.

Decorate your suites of offices with soft Persian rugs and old masters, decorate them like an English country house, decorate them in modern art; impress the client—million dollar budgets, human interest, sales pressure, psychology of the consumer, consumer demand.

An edifice reaching to the skies, and built on—BUNK.



SKYSCRAPERS

SKYSCRAPERS

Up to the clouds rises purely the beautiful mass. Outlined against the sky, the shaft-like emblem stands, symbol of a new era in creation. Mass handled so perfectly it is no longer mass. Delicate bridges hundreds of feet in the air cast their shadows on the earth beneath. Reversed stalactites of steel and stone, they are one with the sun and winds, which gently rock them.

Strong in their fragileness, the steel frame-works go up. The white hot rivets beat incessantly the paeans of praise. Human sacrifice is demanded — only the young and strong dare work on these intensities.

The elevator plunges from the fiftieth story—our hearts beat and our stomachs experience a queer sensation. Gum-chewing stenographers adjust their eyes to vistas that mortal man has never seen before. Small cities, the buildings empty themselves and the hordes they release add to our congestion. In their strength and power, they have refused to accede to our demands.

Proud and beautiful they stand, our American skyscrapers.



THE SUBWAY

THE SUBWAY

Speed under the earth. Boring deep through the bowels of the underground the trains rush on. A mighty force has been released and goes tearing through the darkness. The mind of man has solved the problem. The trains shoot through, the rails shine, the lights glitter; beauty of motion, beauty of symmetry, beauty of mechanical device. Man's conquest over matter.

A seething mass of flesh struggles to get through the automatic doors. There is only one train and they must get on it. Rush for the door, push the next man away, strike if you must, but **GET ON THE TRAIN**. Hurry through the station, no time to be lost. A minute may have a fatal and incalculable result. Foul and fetid breaths, unwashed bodies; get as close as possible to the woman next you—such opportunities must not be lost. Thicker and thicker air laden with all the unpleasantness that humanity in the mass exudes. Nerves frayed to the point where murder springs in the heart.

The train pulls in. Humanity struggles to the surface. Sunshine to see, air to breathe—release from the tremendous depression of the underground. **A I R .**



PROHIBITION

PROHIBITION

Truly a noble experiment. Man, the humanitarian, protects his weaker brother. In our hallowed halls of justice a law has been passed that will do away with all the ills that flesh is heir to. Poverty, crime and vice will be no more—man has been legislated out of his natural appetites.

A tremendous joke has been perpetrated upon us — we suffer from a sorry jest. Lawlessness and viciousness hitherto undreamed of have been released.

A vicious and obscene Bacchus has us in his power. Inside of his tremendous jug the cities rise. He laughs at his victory, laughs that we did not know that opposition would give him the strength he sought. In cellars and garrets we pay him homage. None too proud to do him reverence, none too high to bend the knee.

The rum runners race through the water with their contraband cargo. At the pier wait the armed bootleggers with their trucks. Followed by the hijackers ready to kill and rob, they rush through the streets—while the law turns its back and the marble steps of Washington shine in the moonlight.



THE JEW

THE JEW

Rings on his fingers and bells on his toes. The wandering Jew wanders no more. Our movies move at his command, he creates the songs for a nation. From Poland, from Russia, from Germany, from Austria, he comes to Park Avenue via Garment centre, via Tin Pan Alley, via Hollywood. Even the sacred edifices of banking and the sacrosanct mysteries of Wall Street have been penetrated. With a joyous zest he invades the dwelling places of the elect. He talks business on the finest fairways, his plump and Oriental women disport themselves on the sunniest beaches, his children enter the most hallowed halls of learning. He is home at last.



TRAFFIC

TRAFFIC

The factories spawn their thousands of cars each day. The superior merits of each new model are shouted at the people from countless billboards and advertising pages. Trimmer body lines, altered color schemes—anything to make them different. Don't suffer the indignity of driving a last year's car when one hundred dollars down will buy the later model.

Sunday drivers—and those who control their destiny from the back seat. Motorcycle cops and traffic courts. Reckless drivers and timid souls, on and on they come, a never-dry Niagara.

We have created a Frankenstein that is choking our cities. More and more powerful it grows, insidiously it uncoils its length. It belches smoke, our lungs are filled with its poisonous breath. Our cities are disfigured and shady justice rules.

Once an amiable and obedient pet, amenable to discipline, affording us pleasure, it has grown to a size and strength of which our imagination never dreamed, and threatens with extinction the harried pedestrian.



RADIO

RADIO

The great god RADIO with one touch of his finger spans the earth. He speaks from the shores of ocean to ocean; he flies over the mountains, fleetier than the wind; he has annihilated time and space. A ship is in distress—the god speaks, and human lives are saved. We have harnessed only a tithe of his fleetness, his power—of what possibilities is he not capable? To what heights may he not go? His wings are still untried, his powers not yet gauged.

The Happiness Boys broadcast tonight. Stupendous program will be released over station XYZ, broadcast through the courtesy of Quibbs Toothpaste. Bedtime stories for the kiddies; how to make a bowl of soup; use Agra Oil and keep healthy; learn to appreciate good music by having the plots of grand opera explained in detail by mealy-voiced announcers; enjoy Victor Herbert;—speeches by political candidates, give the farmer relief. Something to be advertised, something to be sold. The triumph of the commonplace. STAND BY, the program continues.



THE DEPARTMENT STORE

THE DEPARTMENT STORE

The doors open, the women surge in. Escalators slowly grind their way up and down. Columns and aisles and counters stretch in endless monotony. All day long the women come; bargains on the first floor, bargains in the basement; necessities for the kitchen and luxuries for the bath.

Services of our expert decorating staff are yours for the asking. Services of our expert fashion staff are yours for the asking.

DEPARTMENT STORE SPONSORS MODERN ART
—DEPARTMENT STORE AUTHORITY ON STYLE.

What altruism! Everything and anything to please the customer—if it pays.

Struggle of humanity. Sales girls on tired and aching feet make their quota for the day. Floorwalkers' faces crack in never-ending smiles of ingratiating. Figures must be made, the lash is on their backs; the new and young ones come and the old and worn-out go. Human flesh and blood is turned into profit. On with the dance, the tempo must not slacken; bigger and better stores, bigger and better figures.



PSYCHOLOGIA

PSYCHOLOGIA

Adventures in the bottomless well—with what tedious thoroughness the modern intelligence reaches its flashlight into the darkness of the subconscious. The beauty of the hermaphroditic ideal — the splendor of the unbridled stallion, a part of the creation of life itself.

Curious sports from the norm. They paint their faces and blacken their eyelashes. They walk with mincing step, waving their hands in the air and speaking in a sweet falsetto. They spend their time with petty passions and petty jealousies.

Shaved necks and mannish clothes — flat heeled shoes and a masculine stride; how misunderstood, how little appreciated—told in long volumes.

And these strange creatures rise from the womb of the Earth Mother, reaching for the white altars of morning.



THE MARKET

THE MARKET

Up and down, there are only two directions it can go, find the one it is going in. Big board, curb, public utilities, gas, radio, steel—all are words—symbols, but of what? Blind, deaf and dumb to all but tips, inside information; a pool is being operated, get in, get in quickly—lose today but win tomorrow. Bull market, bear market, guess which it is going to be. Beg, borrow or steal enough for margin; buy low, sell high; the game goes merrily on. They try to climb to the monotonous beat of the ticker. Lashed by the whip of the tape, they must continually feed the hand that wields it. One poor slave escapes into the light—he has conquered, he is a financial genius, no more work for him when this is so easy. While the ones who have been beaten linger on in the gloom, thinking of what they might have done.

Is it man's love of the game itself, his love of chance—or is it his desire to get something for nothing? Is it his hatred of the monotony of work, his desire to survive by more dangerous and breath-taking means? The cards are stacked against him, there could be no game were it not for him, but he does not make the rules.



COMMERCIALISM

COMMERCIALISM

Chop down the forests and make paper of them; shut off the waterfalls and use the power to make electricity. Harness men to desks, to machines, make the wheels turn faster, make the machines operate more swiftly. Quantity production, uniformity—turn them out as like as peas in a pod—standardization, no waste motion; flood the market and sell on the installment plan. No time for individual achievement, no time for artisanship, for craftsmanship—only volume.

There is a precision and beauty in the machines that man must keep up with; a staccato and relentless rhythm to which he must vibrate.



AIR CONQUEST

AIR CONQUEST

Icarus' wings have melted, like a blazing star he falls to earth. But the sky is not empty—it is filled with prophetic visions of the future. His so glorious attempt and his so glorious failure are destined to have an almost immeasurable effect.

Man's conquest of the elements. With what trepidation he at first crosses the ocean. In his puny vessels he dares the unknown. After years of struggle, still the mastery is not decided. The victory is at times to one, at times to the other.

Conquest of the air! what possibilities it holds. And it belongs to youth, youth who saw the vision first, youth who dared the first attempt, youth who will finally conquer.

Many an Icarus has fallen and will fall. But always new ones will be born. Undaunted Icarus will build new wings, until at last the Sun is reached.

THE BEACH

THE BEACH

Hot-dog counters and near-beer stands. Merry-go-rounds and roller coasters. Dance halls and shooting galleries. Concrete swimming pools. Miles and miles of dusty roads lead to it, roads reeking with the fumes of gasoline and crowded with slowly moving automobiles. Train after train pulls in, packed with perspiring humanity.

Undress and have a hot-dog. Have a dip in the pool. Walk around in your bathing suit, never mind with what bodily graces you may—or may not—be endowed. Enjoy the body contact and the stale air, reeking with the smell of cooking and the odor of flesh.

While the ocean, large, clean and cool, glitters alone in the sunshine, and its surface is ruffled by the splash of the sight-seeing hydroplanes.



SPORTS

SPORTS

Arenas that seat a million people, stadia that accommodate thousands. Enormous gates, the greatest crowds. Home-run kings and world championships. The man with the punch is the man the crowd wants.

Knock the ball the farthest and run the field the fastest. Give the knockout blow. Satisfy the spectator's urge for physical supremacy.

From the packed subways, the over-crowded elevateds, the full-to-bursting street cars, the people push and jostle in the proximity they love. Hot-dogs, peanuts and coca-cola. The grand stand slowly fills. Each man sits tense and expectant, waiting for the moment when his heart will beat a crescendo, his lungs expand in frenzied yelling—he has hit the home run, he has knocked out the champion.

Get the crowds coming, fill the papers with publicity, work up the ballyhoo, create a stage for the gamblers and speculators, make the people think they will see a titanic struggle. Crown the victor with gold, give him a vaudeville contract, send him to Hollywood. Offer him no more the laurel, but the front page and the big money.



THE MOVIES

THE MOVIES

Cathedrals, and temples, and cross-roads of the world. Hundred piece orchestras and million dollar productions. If it costs a lot it must be good. Pay the stars the highest salaries, advertise their sunken baths and mansions in Beverly Hills. Advertise their pure home life and love of their art—equally pure.

Line forms on the right. Standing room only until the next performance. In the villages, in the towns, in the suburbs, in the cities, we go to the movies. Inside the theatre, hushed and expectant we sit happily, anticipating the feast to be spread before us. Travel pictures, home life of the ant, cartoons, style reviews, and then — the Feature. Woman is tempted but does not fall—but show the tempting; evil is flouted—but show in all detail the evil. Virtue triumphs and they live happily ever after—but show a long and final kiss.

Long life to the cinema—where else will we find our illusions?



WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON

Dusty sedan after dusty sedan pulls up to the steps of the White House for the inestimable and never-to-be-forgotten privilege of shaking the hand of the president. From California, from Florida, from Maine, from Nebraska, from all parts of the country the pilgrims come.

See the Smithsonian Institution, full of relics; see the Capitol, and thrill at the knowledge that this is where the noble senators and representatives make our laws; see the Congressional Library; don't miss the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial. Do them as fast as possible, swallow them in huge gulps, but don't let any escape you. See the fine examples of Greek architecture America has put up.

Pay no heed to the marvels you have passed on your road to Washington. Take no account of the bridges over almost unbridgeable cañons and rivers, of the colossal dams, glorious in their beauty and triumph of engineering; of the long tunnels through the solid mountains; of the mile after mile of well-constructed road — what indeed are these, compared with the wonder that is Washington?



THE TABLOIDS

THE TABLOIDS

A writhing, struggling stream of humanity is ground into the rollers of the press. Its joys and sorrows, its crimes and passions, all are to be served in a dish to tickle the palate of the epicure. Everything served with a highly spiced sauce of obscenity—prostitution made romantic, crime made thrilling, lawlessness and brutality made dramatic.

Evangelist discovered in love nest — there's a thrill for you. Movie star kills lover—what passions move these queens of love and beauty! Dead men shot in a bootleggers' war, obligingly left by the police to be photographed; smuggled pictures of the death chamber, with the chair lovingly clasping its victim in its arms—what vicarious sex thrills abound, what sadism is encouraged—that the moron may have a pleasant trip down in the subway in the morning; that the telephone operator may not be bored, that the mind of the office boy may be happily occupied.

While the soulless master of it all turns the pages and laughs—on with the tabloids, circulation increasing every month.



RELIGION

RELIGION

Sunday movies, concerts and baseball games. Get away early in the morning and have a clear road—the Sunday drivers are off. Take the golf clubs and the bathing suits. Pack the lunch basket and fill the thermos—we're off for the day. Tune in on the Sunday service, the Reverend Platitude prays.

While the light streams in through the stained glass windows of the churches, shining on beautifully carved altars and softly cushioned seats, and the suave baritone voices of the clergy fill the calm and dispassionate air.



SUBURBIA

SUBURBIA

Fresh air, sunshine, green grass, trees—God's gifts to man in abundance; why stay in a dirty, noisy city where rents are high, when Heaven—at lower rents—awaits around the corner? Why, indeed? Five minutes from the station, golf, country clubs, in fact—Elysium.

Mediocrity, the triumph of the second rate, the sacrifice of mental stimulus, of selection of companionship, the acceptance of the shadow for the substance, of radio for music, of movies for art; sex novels, bridge, gossip, daytime gin, anaemic and uncompleted sex contacts with one's neighbor; bastard architecture—a colonial mansion, French chateau, an Elizabethan cottage, a Spanish bungalow. And on the highest point of vantage, on one of God's so widely advertised green hills, stands the large billboard of the development company.

The tracks to town speed the departing husband, who discusses on the train the superior merits of his new automobile, the excellence of his golf game, his successful social contacts with those above him financially; while behind him the telephone wires buzz with gossip, the bridge game is on, Suburbia is in its glory.



SCIENCE

SCIENCE

The stars and the planets, the moons and the suns—a vast universe governed by laws immutable and inscrutable. But the mind of man is not content that these laws remain unknown. With what presumption he counts the stars and seeks to measure the forces that move them. Once he stood afraid on the shores of an ocean that rimmed the infinite, that hid the sun when it sank and the moon till it rose. But slowly, falteringly, with infinite stress he creeps forward.

Held in the hour glass of life and death, he struggles to penetrate its mysteries—he thinks to solve the riddle.



MODERN ART

MODERN ART

Impressionism, futurism, cubism, surreilisme. Cezanne to skyscrapers—and all that has gone between. An expression of this age—our own. Our desire to break away from the photographic, the orthodox. Machinery set the key—and we experiment.

Drawings made with T squares. Ladies with bulbous legs. Nudes with elephantiasis. Furniture with angles that threaten life and limb. Colors screaming at each other. Designs born in an insane asylum. Poetry with no meaning, music with no form. New values—and crimes committed in the name of modernity.

Liked or disliked, understood or abused, to exist or to perish, it is here today.



